CHURCHES TOGETHER *in* BEXHILL

BEXHILL MUSEUM Association

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Churches Together in Bexhill

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BEXHILL MUSEUM
Association

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THE STORY SO FAR

One of the familiar summer sights on Bexhill's seafront is the gathering of townspeople and visitors for open-air hymn singing on the De La Warr Pavilion terrace. Songs of praise ring across the promenade and beach as people gather to lift their voices to God in favourite hymns, old and new. This beloved tradition began as beach services organised by the Bexhill Council of Churches in its first year of existence, shortly after the Second World War. The formation of the council, whose name was modernised to Churches Together in Bexhill in 1966, was piloted by Canon Godfrey Bell, rector of St Peter's, who became its first chairman. The constitution-drafting committee of the Bexhill Council of Churches was held on 21st June 1946. A draft constitution supplied by the British Council of Churches was adopted. Ten local churches, which each paid a subscription of 10/- (50p) a year, were represented.

That first year was a busy one. A beach services committee was formed, along with one to arrange services with clergy on duty at the [Bexhill] hospital, and services for the international week of prayer for unity. The council decided that it should spearhead an exchange of visits between local young people and those of European [Continental] countries, including our former opponents in war. There was discussion on the question of youth ad its attitude to religion, and the council set up a conference of youth leaders.

The religious lawn on the seafront, still occasionally used for Christian outreach, was identified in 1947. The suggested site, a grass rectangle west of the Pavilion, was viewed and approved. The Borough Council approved and the first service was held on the first Sunday in July 1947.

That same year the Council tackled the continued Sunday cinema opening in Bexhill. Wartime hardships had led to Sunday film showings, but at the end of the war the churches felt things should go back to normal. The Council identified a need for a manifesto from the churches as a lead to the people on the wider subject of Sunday observance. Dr. England said the churches had a "duty to fight the issue and prevent further encroachment on Sunday observance." A public meeting was held in

May and it was the front page story in the Bexhill Observer. The Council said that "all works except those of necessity and mercy should be avoided on this day." It said the churches had to use their influence against the "rising tide of secularism." The public packed a meeting held by the Council and the vote to end Sunday cinema opening was lost by three votes.

Against this disappointment the beach services, held during July and August had awoken considerable interest and good attendance. Action was taken against the small allocation of fuel to the churches in the winter of 1947-48, during the coal miners strike, and the council secretary was detailed to approach the Local Fuel Overseer.

Over the years the Council of Churches made sure the Christian voice was heard throughout the town:

Parliamentary candidates have been invited to speak at special meetings at election time since 1983.

The first lay chairman was appointed in 1980.

Council of Churches delegates went to the House of Commons to oppose Sunday trading.

The council spoke out against the opening of occult and sex shops in Bexhill in 1981.

It opposed magistrates granting drink licences in garage shops.

Other initiatives have included:

Local Christian Aid Week Third World charity fund-raising.

Annual Lent lecture series.

Carol singing in Town Hall Square started in December 1985 and has recently been held at the De La Warr Pavilion.

An action group was set up to help Bexhill's 1,200 unemployed in the early 1980s.
Churches Together now includes Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist, United Reformed and Methodist denominations, other free churches, the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends. United services are held on the 5th Sunday of each month. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is well supported by services of intercession and interdenominational pulpit swaps.

The spirit of the original meeting in 1947 lives on. The question of holding periodical united services was put to the executive committee where it was warmly supported. The need for such services as evidence of the unity for which this council stood was warmly reflected in this meeting.

KING OFFA AND BEXHILL

A silver penny showing an effigy of King Offa's head.

I Offa, king of the English, for the good of my soul and for the love of God...grant in eternal possession to Almighty God and to the venerable Bishop Oswald a certain piece of land in Sussex for the building there of a church and the endowing of the church so that it may be seen to serve the praise of God and the honour of the saints, that is 8 hides in the place which is called Bexhill.

Offa II, King of the Mercians, signed his famous Charter on 15th August 772 AD, along with Cynewulf, King of the West Saxons, King Egbert of Kent, the Archbishop of Canterbury, four bishops and four aldermen. It was the first recorded moment in Bexhill's history. The kingdom of the South Saxons (Sussex) had been the least known and wildest of the Saxon territories and was the last past of Britain to be converted to Christianity. St. Wilfred, a Northumbrian monk, was shipwrecked on the Sussex coast in 666 AD. He and his party were met with hostility and one priest was murdered. But 15 years later Wilfred, by then the exiled Bishop of York, decided to return to pagan Sussex. He found the people starving and desperate and in giving them pastoral care he also taught them to fish. Along with this practical help he shared the Gospel with them and made many converts. Christianity began to grow and spread eastwards in the county. One of the earliest Christian communities in Sussex was in Bexhill so Offa's gift of eight hides - about 500 acres - to the little Saxon settlement was clearly the cause of great rejoicing. The church built by Offa's grant was almost certainly on the hill of what is now Old Town: St Peter's.

St. Peter's Church prior to the Victorian restoration

During 19th century restoration, Sussex herring-bone stonework was found in the arcading between the Norman arches, along with the famous Bexhill Stone, an eighth century stone carved with Saxon ornament with Celtic influence. Most archaeologists think the stone probably comes from the north of England and is the lid of a reliquary, containing the relics of a saint, placed in the original church at the time of its consecration. Research, however, has suggested that the "eight hides of inland" given by Offa were around Cooden and Northeye. Possible candidates for the original church are the now lost Northeye and St Oswald's, Hooe, especially as St Wilfrid is thought to have brought the bones of St Oswald to Sussex. Tradition, though, with strong justification, names the original church as St Peter's. Whatever the history, the words of former rector Clifford Earwaker are undeniably true: *"The church people of this ancient parish have real cause to bless the memory of Offa the Mighty and he will be remembered for generations to come."*

THE ANGLICAN CHURCHES

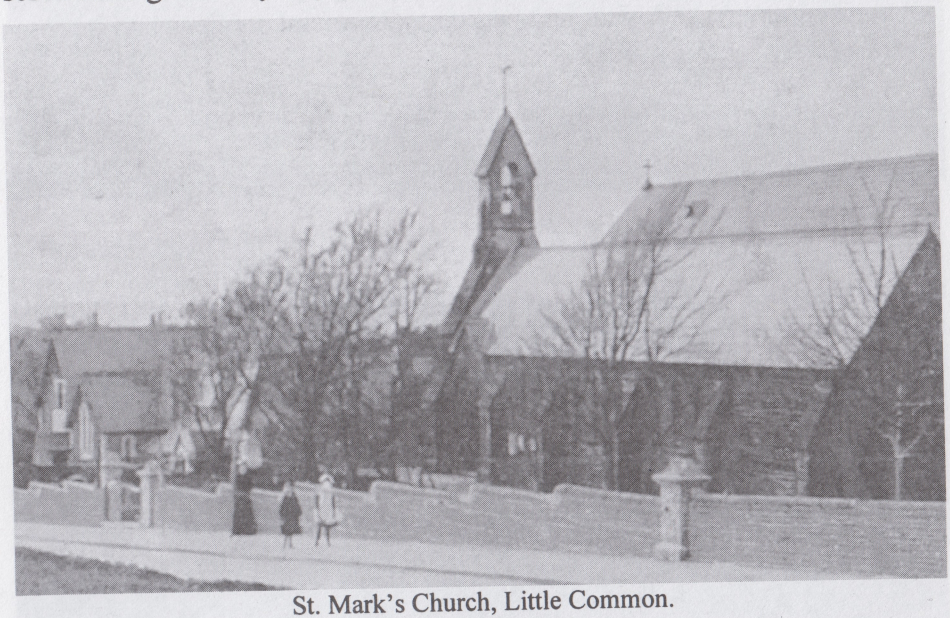
St. Peter's Church was the seed from which the community of Bexhill grew and flourished. The parish had an enormous influence (not only religious) on the development of the town. It provided the town's first education when Dr Thomas Pye, Rector from 1589 to 1609, used it as a school house. The parish vestry formed a large part of the town's early local government and what is now known as social services had its roots in the church's clergy and laity.

St. Peter's Church in about 1910

Parish Church overcrowding led to nine more Anglican churches. Every Anglican parish was originally part of St Peter's and a spurt of church building, as the town grew, eventually saw the division of the parish into six.

St Peter's was founded in the 8th century but nothing is known of the Saxon priests, although Geoffrey and Roger are mentioned as clerks in the Domesday Book. The record of priests from the early 13th century is almost complete, the earliest written on parchment.

The volumes of the parish magazine, which dates from 1874, give a unique record of Anglican life in Bexhill. Critics spoke of "wanton destruction" when the dormer windows and high pews of the church were swept away and the south aisle and chancel were extended. But even so, as the parish church, it was not unusual for overcrowding at St. Peter's to be so severe that up to 200 people had to be turned away from services at great holy days and festivals.



St. Mark's Church, Little Common.

As Bexhill grew so did the need for more Anglican churches. St. Mark's, Little Common, was the first parish to divide from St. Peter's. The church was built in 1842 from materials from No. 42 Martello Tower, demolished at Bulverhythe and brought by sea to Cooden. The church was at first served by curates of St. Peter's and the separate parish was created in 1857. Its longest-serving Rector, James Simpson was there for 53 years. He was the son of the Revd. Henry Winkworth Simpson who was the Rector of St. Peter's for 36 years. The tiny church of St. James was built at The Sluice, Normans Bay, in 1866, for the coast guards and troops of the Coast Brigade and their families. Services were previously held in the guardroom or the coast guard officer's house. The church, which had been served from St. Mark's, closed in 1967.

St. James Church, Normans Bay

The next parish to become detached from St Peter's was St Barnabas. The Rector of St Peter's, Canon Clarke, had been increasingly worried about the lack of a church in the rapidly growing town between the railway and the sea, and when he retired in 1888 he donated £6,000 for the building of a church. The 7th Earl De La Warr gave the land at the corner of Sea Road and Cantelupe Road and his son, Viscount Cantelupe, was the first people's warden. The first vicar of St Barnabas was Edward Mortlock, who had been curate of St Peter's. He was a formidable personality in the religious and social work of the town and his concern led to the appointment of a parish nurse.

St. Barnabas Church in 1891

During the 1930s St Barnabas adopted a poor Stockton-on-Tees parish and after World War Two it adopted a devastated church in Hamburg, one of the first examples of church liaison with the former enemy.

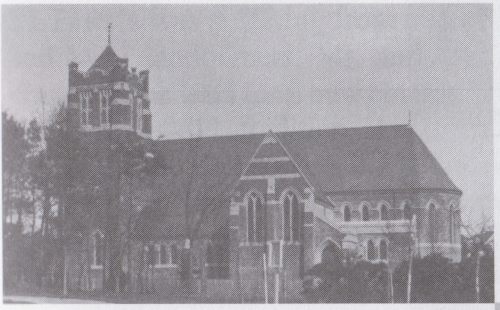
St. Andrew's Church, Wickham Avenue.

As Bexhill expanded westwards in the 1890s there was a need for another church in St Barnabas parish. The result was the mission church of St Andrew in Wickham Avenue, which was dedicated in 1900. Its founder, the energetic parish priest of St Barnabas, Canon Edward Mortlock, said of his lack of money for the scheme:

> *Though I have no means and no human probability of procuring them, I believe this great work will be accomplished.*

St Andrews later became a conventional district and is now part of St Peter's Parish.

With the growth of the town, Mr. J. Lambert Walker, of Woodsgate, agreed to pay for a clergyman to come over from St Leonards-on-Sea twice on a Sunday. But local people did not use the mission hall; they wanted a real church. So Mr. Lambert Walker gave an acre of land from his estate and £10,000 to build a church, St Stephen's, consecrated in 1900. The first time its bell was tolled for a death was for the passing of Queen Victoria in January 1901.



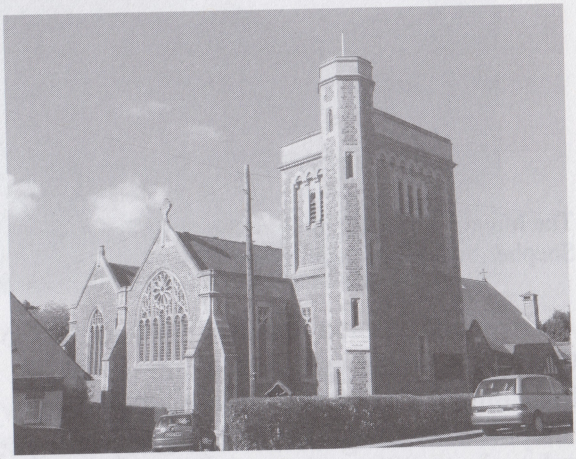
St. Stephen's Church.

The Malet Hall; the Church of the Good Shepherd was on the first floor.

An iron hut mission hall dedicated to the Good Shepherd, on the site of the sports centre in Little Common Road, was opened in 1885. The mission hut's name was preserved in the now closed Church of the Good Shepherd in King Offa Way. Lady Ermyntrude Malet, widow of Sir Edward Malet, one of the first men in Bexhill to own a car, built the Malet Hall with church over, in his memory in 1913. Its purpose was to provide a meeting place for working men, giving religious instruction, as an alternative to the pub.

An old Sussex barn was the inspiration for the nave of All Saints, Sidley. The Anglican church presence in the village had been the church school which opened in 1865 and which was also used for religious services. In 1885 it was succeeded by what was called the Iron Church, later used as a garage. The development of the area, accelerated by the Bexhill West to Crowhurst railway, led to a fund being set up in 1905 to build a permanent church. The nave was dedicated in 1909 on All Saints Day. Plans to complete the church were deferred during World War I and revived in 1921. Building and expansion continued until the enlarged church was consecrated in 1930.

Sidley's Iron Church



All Saints's Church, Sidley

Schoolgirls leaving St. Peter's on a sunny Sunday in 1937

Crocodiles of schoolchildren from Bexhill's numerous independent schools were a familiar Sunday sight as they wound their way to the parish church of St Peter's in the between wars period.

St. Peter's was suffering from one of its periodic times of overcrowding and local landowners, Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Dunn, offered to give the church some land for a new church, providing it was built in seven years. A centuries-old tradition that churches on high ground should be dedicated to St Michael and All Angels was followed and the foundation stone of the Glassenbury Drive church was laid at Michaelmas, 1929. It is believed that, according to a tradition with maritime churches, the tower was added as a navigational aid to vessels in the Channel.

St. Augustine's Church, Cooden Drive.

The explosion of house building in the Cooden area after the First World War meant yet another church, but not without protest from the neighbours! Clerical diplomacy won the day, and the foundation stone of St Augustine's, Cooden Drive, was laid in 1933 and the church was consecrated by Bishop Bell a year later. Thirty years and a world war later the finally completed church was consecrated in 1963. It had not been easy: the South Cliff and Cooden Drive area had been used as a school of trench warfare in the first World War and building work was dogged by the constant danger of unexploded bombs and shells.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

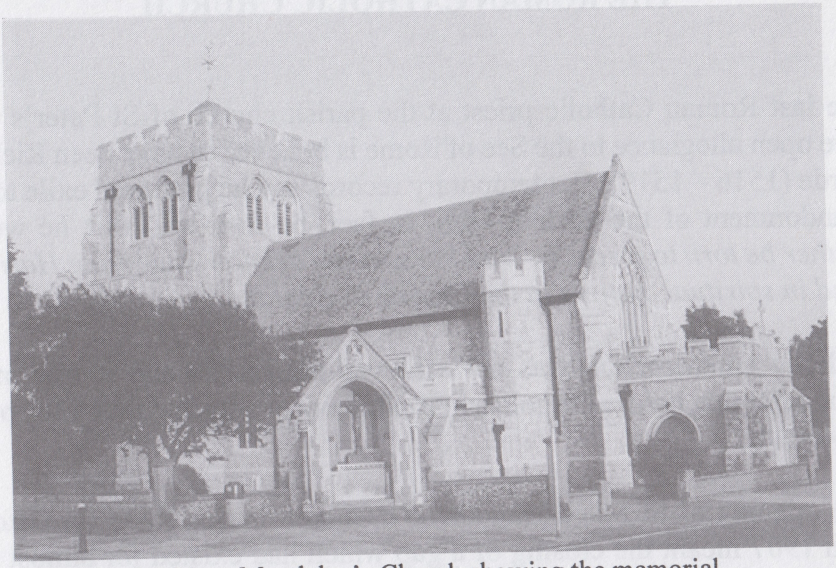
The last Roman Catholic priest at the parish church of St Peter's who bore open allegiance to the See of Rome is believed to have been Richard Borde (1516 – 1519). Contemporary records say he preferred exile to the abandonment of the ancient faith, in fact, he later said that he would "*rather be torn to pieces by wild horses than acknowledge King Harry as head in spiritual matters in the Church of England*".

Catholic emancipation was not achieved until 1829 and it was many years after that before Catholics in Bexhill once more had their own place of worship.

The opening of St Mary Magdalene's Church in Sea Road on October 24th 1907 meant the closing of a gap which had existed for almost 400 years. In that time Catholics often likened their plight to that of the persecuted Christians of the early Church.

In 1850, when Cardinal Wiseman was Archbishop of Westminster, he consulted Dr. Dukes of St Leonards, one of the converts of the Oxford Movement. The doctor recommended the Cardinal to "*try the air at Bexhill*". The Cardinal found such benefit in his stay that he continued to re-visit for his health, staying at The Cottage, Belle Hill. It was there that the first recorded Catholic mass in Bexhill since the Reformation was celebrated by the Cardinal.

In 1891, when Bexhill was part of a Catholic parish which stretched from Eastbourne to Lydd, the Institute of Charity was granted permission to open a mission at Bexhill. A site was bought in Sea Road and the first mass was celebrated, in a chapel intended to be a future school room, on July 13th 1893. Under the foundation stone laid on December 13th 1906 was laid earth from Jerusalem, from the place of St Peter's weeping, from the Mount of Olives, from the prison in Rome where St Peter and St Paul were confined together with stones from the Catacombs in Rome. Consecration took place at an impressive four-hour service in September 1913.



St. Mary Magdalen's Church showing the memorial

The corner war memorial, designed by Borough Mayor Councillor George Gray, was the first in the town to be erected after the First World War.

In 1964, after a Vatican decision, Mass was celebrated at the church in English for the first time. It took the authority of a Government to sanction completion of Bexhill's second Roman Catholic Church and the generosity of a local millionaire to provide the site for the third.

Since 1894 the centre for the spiritual, physical and educational care had been Nazareth House in Hastings Road which was opened in 1894 at a cost of £7,000 as a permanent home for the aged and infirm poor of both sexes and also for incurable and orphaned girls; those entirely idiotic or suffering from fits excepted. In 1911 a west wing was added including a chapel consecrated at the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The new wing also included a dormitory and infirmary for elderly ladies. In August 1926 mens' wing was added on the east side at a cost of £25,000. There were then more than 130 children in the home. A school was run by the sisters.

St. Martha's Church, Little Common.

Meanwhile, new work was beginning at Little Common. Father Edmund Hobson, a dedicated Bexhill priest, was the inspiration behind the movement to build a Catholic church in the village. The foundation stone for St Martha's Church at "Cackle Corner", at the junction of Cooden Sea Road and Collington Lane West, was laid by the Bishop of Pella in August 1939. When war broke out within a month the outlook for completing Marshall Wood's design looked bleak. All available man-power was needed for building airfields, tank traps, beach defences and air raid shelters. Undeterred, the Catholic authorities sought Ministry permission. work continued and the church was opened unofficially and unconsecrated in 1940 and used initially only on Sundays. It was not until January 1971 that St Martha's was finally consecrated.

What had been the first chapel in Magdalene Road became a school which remained in use until 1961 when it transferred to its present accommodation in the east wing of Nazareth House. St Richard's Roman Catholic Secondary School opened in Ashdown Road in 1959.

The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Sidley.

The Church responded to the rapid post-war development of Sidley when land at Southlands Road was given by wealthy owner George Ravenshear. The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary was designed by Father Geoffrey Smith. The church was blessed by the Bishop of Southwark on its completion in 1954. Parishioners had to wait another 17 years for their hall.

THE BAPTIST CHURCH

Imagine the astonishment when an Anglican handed over a blank cheque and told a Baptist pastor to build his church. However, the pastor later staged a rates strike in protest against contributing indirectly to what he considered to be Anglican teaching in council schools!

The first attempt to establish the Baptist cause in Bexhill was unsuccessful. Members of the Hastings church were thwarted as they tried to find a meeting hall in Bexhill in the 1870s. After a lapse of some years, services began in the Assembly Room, a meeting place which had been built in the early 1890s in Station Road and later incorporated into garage premises. No further progress was made until 1895 when Mrs. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, widow of the "Prince of Preachers", visited Bexhill on holiday. When she asked in the street where the Baptists met a Bexhillian told her : *Don't know M'am; never 'eard of no such Baptists 'ere.* She deputed Pastor John Hockey, a man of indomitable will, to move to the town and found a church.

Beulah Baptist Church

Pastor John Hockey

He arrived in 1896 but Bexhill Urban Council refused permission for him to use a large room in the original section of the Town Hall. Undaunted he began holding services preaching Baptist temperance in the York Hall which adjoined the York Hotel in Station (now London) Road . He switched to the Jubilee Institute, now the older section of Bexhill Youth and Community Centre. But he was also moving fast. By August 1896 the foundation stones for a school/chapel were laid in adjoining Clifford

Road by Mrs. Spurgeon's twin sons Charles and Thomas, both pastors of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. The £1,300 building was opened in December 1896. Within a year of his arrival, Pastor Hockey had put a roof over the heads of his congregation and opened it debt-free. Unflagging, he set about building a £4,000 memorial church to Pastor Spurgeon to Resta Moore's design. Pastor Hockey declared :

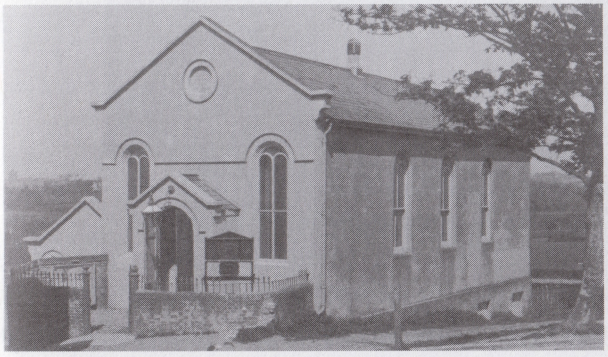
There must be no debt on this house of God! I am going to give all I possibly can to it and trust to my rich Father to send the remainder. He knows how much will be needed; and if He inclines the hearts of any dear friends to help me in this new work for Him, I shall be very grateful to accept their assistance, But I shall beg only of Him and there will be no Concerts or Bazaars or worldly entertainments of any sort to share in the erection of Beulah Baptist Church, Bexhill-on-Sea!

In 1897 Mrs. Spurgeon turned the first sod on the Clifford Road/ Buckhurst Road corner. Pastor Hockey's prayer was answered. Beulah church opened debt-free in August 1898. A member of the Church of England handed Pastor Hockey a blank cheque and told him to fill in the amount. Baptists at Sidley praised the Lord in a "tabernacle", a temporary church that served their cause for nearly 50 years. In 1907 the Baptists were invited by the Methodists to take over the Nonconformist cause in Sidley.

It was a process that through mission work was to see the word spread from Peru to Pakistan. Pastor Hockey gladly accepted the challenge. Within a year he had more than 100 children attending Sunday school and by 1909 the Beulah congregation had launched a building fund. By June 1913 a plot of land at Sidley Street had been bought for £73 and a corrugated iron building bought from the Presbyterians at Hampden Park. It opened on 10th September 1913 and, continuing the link with Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was named Haddon Hall. The congregation at Beulah recorded its determination in 1938 to build a more permanent structure at Sidley, for which £3,000 was required. The Tin Tabernacle was re-decorated. Sister Dorothy Finch of the order of Baptist Deaconesses was appointed deacon-in-charge at Sidley. The balance in the general account stood at £1.10s!

THE METHODIST CHURCH

Methodism gained its first base in Bexhill for an outlay of £250. At Little Common it was founded on a chapel built of turf! Like the Salvationists after them, the early Methodists had a brutal start in this area, perhaps because the new movement gained hold through its appeal to the men of the Coastguard, stationed along the Sussex coast at a time when smuggling was both rife and popular. As the fear of Napoleonic invasion led to the Coastguard's numbers being increased so the good news of the movement founded by John Wesley, "the Lord's Horseman," spread from one isolated Coastguard station to another.



Belle Hill Wesleyan Chapel in 1910.

By 1809 there was a vigorous Methodist cause in Bexhill with 23 members, including Coastguards. The Methodists met in a cottage by the stream at the bottom of Belle Hill, later moving to a stable loft at the White House, a large property half-way up the hill. Hanoverian troops of the King's German Legion, stationed in Old Town, swelled local Methodism's ranks. The troops left for Waterloo in 1815. In a sale dated 11th May 1822, the Methodists bought a plot of former barracks land at the junction of Barrack Road and Belle Hill and erected a chapel. It was opened in the early summer of 1826. Attendance increased to 90 and in 1869 a new schoolroom was added. In 1887 the chapel was extended to seat 180 and in 1892 the Sunday School was enlarged at a cost of !135. The Methodist Union of 1932 welded together those who followed the Wesleyan cause and the Primitive Methodists, and by 1938, the Belle Hill chapel and Springfield Road Methodist Church merged and the chapel was sold.

In 1895 a small band of Primitive Methodist missionaries from Hastings came to Sidley, preaching on the village green. Further visits led to conversions. Regular Sunday and mid-week services developed. In 1873 a site was bought in Haddocks Hill, as the Sidley end of Wrestwood Road was then known. For a total cost of £290 the pioneers built a 100-seater chapel. This served until the great revival of the Hastings Primitive Methodist Circuit, of which Sidley formed part.

Springfield Road Methodist Church.

Meanwhile, the growing district of Bexhill and Sidley witnessed a great struggle between a firm of brewers and the Temperance Movement over the brewer's attempt to obtain licence for a public house on the corner of Springfield Road and Holliers Hill. Victory came to the temperance forces, but to make sure this victory endured, Mr. Marshall Jay, a London churchman, bought the site. Mr. Jay and his wife were driving by the Haddocks Hill chapel when they heard beautiful singing within. They were so moved when they heard the story of the foundation of Methodism in that part of the town and of the titanic struggle with the brewery that Mr. Jay bought the corner site for the building of a new church. Backed by sacrificial gifts and labour from members and friends, Springfield Road Methodist Church was opened on 20th March 1907. The old chapel was sold but a debt remained. On the seventh anniversary of the opening service the last £200 was handed to the treasurer. The packed congregation rose to a man and sang the Doxology.

Sackville Road Methodist Church.

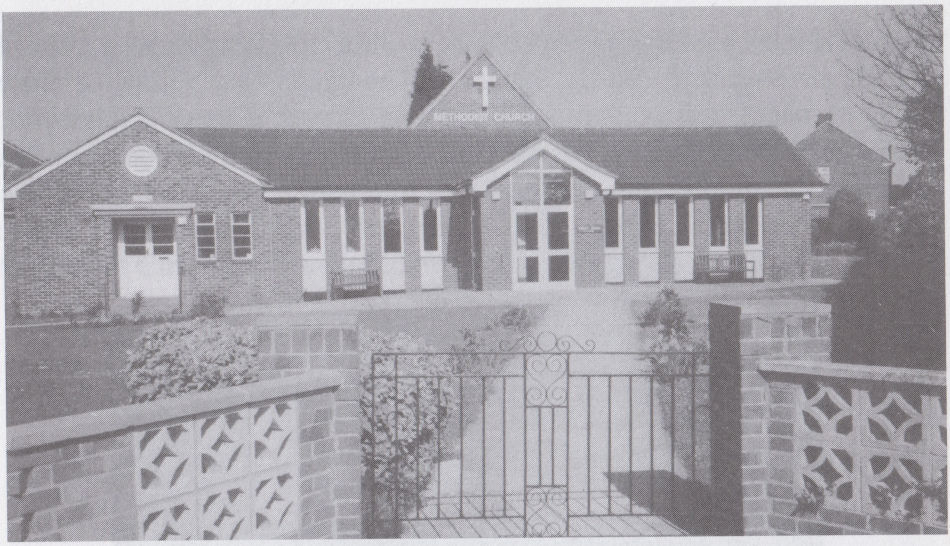
At the start of the boom period of Bexhill's development, the St Leonard's Methodist Circuit struck a tremendous bargain in 1887 by buying a large plot at the junction of Sackville Road and Parkhurst Road. Belle Hill chapel members had been in the vanguard of the movement to bring Methodism south of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway's tracks. A mission was started near the station. The quarterly meeting of the circuit in 1892 decided :

> *That permission be given to erect a school chapel (and vestries) on the new site at Bexhill, to seat 200 persons and at an estimated cost of £1,120.*

By May 1892 the foundation stones were laid and the hall was opened that October. The new hall, still in great demand as Parkhurst Hall, was used as a chapel, a Sunday School room and as a meeting place. The cause was pursued with unabated vigour. By Easter Monday 1896, 6 April 12 foundation stones had been laid for the new church. By 1st August the *Bexhill Observer* was reporting :

> *Amid great rejoicings, the new Wesleyan chapel erected in Sackville Road was opened on Wednesday last.* July 29 1896

The event undoubtedly marked an epoch in the history of Methodism in the St Leonards Circuit.



Little Common Methodist Church.

Wesleyans seeking a place of worship in the then tiny village of Little Common back in 1837 had but one course of action open to them; roll up their sleeves and build a chapel. The bill lists timber, flooring, windows, shutters, roofing, slates and joinery. No mention is made of any bricks. This was a turf chapel. The work took five months. It was in use until 1859 when it was replaced by a brick chapel costing just £62. A committee was appointed in 1915 to pursue a building project. a site was acquired in Church Hill Avenue, financed partly by the sale of the old chapel. The stone-laying ceremony was in April 1926 and as a tribute to the fallen of the Great War the six foundation stones echoed the shape of war grave headstones in France. The church hall was added in 1953 and a new south aisle to the church and improved entrance in 1964.

THE UNITED REFORM CHURCHES

Had the First World War not intervened, Bexhill's pioneer Presbyterians might well have sold their new church within 20 years of building it. They meant to build a far grander structure in a more central part of the town as a replacement for St George's in Cantelupe Road. By contrast, their future brethren, the Congregationalists, decided to build their church by democratic vote.

The Presbyterian cause in the town was established after one of several families closely associated with the church at Warrior Square, St. Leonards moved to newly-developing Bexhill. This persuaded the Rev. Robert Cowan to encourage the formation of a Presbyterian meeting. The result was an application to the then Presbytery of South London for the start of regular services in Bexhill. Meetings began in the Institute in Station Road, now Bexhill Youth and Community Centre, in July 1898. Amongst visiting ministers was the Rev. T. Foster Edwards from Cumberland, who made such an impression that the congregation invited him to become their first minister. he took up office in May 1900, his induction service being held at the Sackville Road Methodist Church.

The offer by Earl De La Warr of a plot of ground on his fast-developing estate between Cantelupe Road and Lionel road seemed attractive. The offer was a 99 year lease at £10 a year or £200 freehold, The church later took up the purchase option. The offer was generous but the church elders were not able to see at the time that they were committing themselves to the equivalent of painting themselves into a corner. Typical of the prodigious features of progress in Bexhill at that time, the Presbyterians were ready to lay the foundation stones for the new church within a year of Mr. Edwards' arrival. On Easter Monday 1901, Countess De La Warr laid the first stone on the south side of the building. But the stone-laying marked the zenith of Presbyterian building in Bexhill. What the pioneers had built was never intended to be a permanent church but a 25 seat lecture hall, stage one of a far grander two-stage project. No sooner was phase one finished than a *special appeal* was launched for phase two. But the total cost of the completed complex; lecture hall, classrooms and big church was £6,100. Phase two was abandoned.

By then the church leaders were realising as the police had done with the building of their station next door, that this was not going to be the centre of modern Bexhill. They were out on a limb and by 1909 there was a proposal to buy a new site and build on it. The union, in 1972, between the Presbyterians and Congregational churches brought St. George's into brotherhood with St. John's in London Road.

Victoria Hall, Victoria Road.

Early Congregationalists in Bexhill built Victoria Hall. Nine years were to pass before , by a wonderfully democratic process, they decided to build St John's. The founding father was a Hastings schoolmaster with a belief that men's names had no place on foundation stones. John Stewart Halley was principal of University School, Hastings. He moved to Bexhill in 1880 and finding there was no Free Church provision except Belle Hill Wesleyan Chapel, he put up a marquee in the grounds of his home, Heatherdune at the top of the Down, and held services in it. He bought a site in what was expected to be the shopping centre of Bexhill and built a multi-purpose structure in a new development to be known as Victoria Road. It served as a place of worship, reading room, meeting hall and private school. The building was opened in August 1887 and in honour of the Queen's jubilee was named Victoria Hall.
In 1891, with the Congregational movement gathering strength, Victoria

Hall worshippers signed a *Statement of Belief*. In 1896 the signatories met to determine whether the time had come to take a bold step. They passed a resolution "*that we hereby constitute ourselves the Congregational Church, Station Road, Bexhill.*"

St. John's Church, London Road.

London Road was then considered an extension of Station Road and it was decided to build a church adjoining the hall at the junction of Victoria Road and Station Road. There is no foundation stone in the church. John Stewart declared "*It is a pet hobby of mine to have none. I was able to forbid it at Victoria Hall because I built it and I am glad there is not one here. The names of men get on to memorial stones and I do not want to see them.*"

OTHER FREE CHURCHES

Bexhill's spirit of independence is reflected in its Christian life. Along with the Established Church and mainstream denominations, the town is also home to a variety of free churches.

In the mid 1980s a group of Bexhill Christians started meeting together. They were part of what is now known as the *charismatic renewal* and their particular style of worship, preaching, teaching and meeting reflected this. After a short while the group started to meet at Sidley Primary School and the name of Vine Christian Fellowship was adopted. Over the next several years the church gradually became involved in the town and took part in events such as the seafront outreach during the summer. As this happened the church grew, partly by people becoming Christians and partly through like-minded Christians joining them.

During the last five years several things have changed in the church. Certainly the most visible and one of the most important was the opening of Revelation, the Christian bookshop in Buckhurst Place. A group of folk from the Vine started to look at this in earnest during 1995-6 and in September 1996 the shop was opened. Thanks to excellent support from all the churches in the town and a few further afield the shop is now operating successfully.

The other changes for the church were a change of name and location. To reflect the church's intention to be more involved with the town the name was changed to Bexhill Community Church - The Vine and at the same time the location was changed to Battle Abbey School in Hastings Road.

A bus strike was responsible for the setting-up of the Bexhill Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends - the Quakers. They usually had to travel to Hastings to worship, but the strike in 1957 led to a Meeting for Worship being held at a private home in Knebworth Road, followed by the Glyne Hall Hotel from 1961. The Friends bought their present Meeting House in Albert Road from The Brethren in 1956. An initial offer of £7,000 was accepted, but the Friends felt the price was too low and increased their offer to £8,000. The first Meeting for Worship in the new premises was held on 28th November 1965, and in the following February the Friends were "at home" to 130 church and civic representatives and Friends from other Meetings.

The Society of Friends Meeting House.

To explain Quakers' beliefs, a series of Sunday evening meetings was arranged during 1966. The first address was given by Dame Kathleen Lonsdale, DBE, FRS, the first woman to be elected president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the third Quaker in five years to hold that office. Her subject was "Quakerism and Science." Philip Wragge, principal of Dunsford House, Midhurst, spoke on "The Quaker contribution to Life"; "The International Work of the Friends", was the subject of another address and Christopher Holdsworth spoke on "Quakerism, Past and Present".

Distinguished members of the Meeting have included Dame Kathleen Lonsdale, who moved to Bexhill in 1965, Arthur Jessop, the first clerk, who was awarded the MBE for his services in Mauritius and Elise Gledhill, who founded a school in Harare for young blacks who were unemployable because they were unschooled and unskilled.

More recently, a public meeting was held to mark the 50 years of Quaker involvement in peace and reconciliation work since they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947, and as part of the 1200th Charter celebrations of Bexhill, the Society of Friends held a Quaker Exhibition at the Meeting House which was attended by 500 people.

Bexhill Friends have always had an ecumenical outlook and have taken part in activities arranged by Churches Together in Bexhill. Friends value the opportunity to exchange pulpits in Christian Unity Week, have given lectures in CTB's Lent Lecture series and contributed to the *Bexhill Observer's* Just A Minute column. Austerity lunches, garden parties, recitals and sales have raised money for local and national causes as well as for such specifically Quaker concerns as the founding of the Chair of Peace Studies at Bradford University.

Although few in number (in 1968 the listed membership was 41, it is now 19), the members endeavour to "*let their lives speak*" as individuals and as a group.

St. Paul's Church, Wickham Avenue.

Objections to ritualism in the Established Church led to the formation of the Free Church of England in 1845. A clergyman of that church was shocked, when holidaying in Bexhill, to find that there was no place of worship to suit his beliefs. An exploratory meeting was held in Bexhill in 1923 and services began the following year. In 1924 St Paul's, a temporary wooden church, was dedicated on land in Wickham Avenue, and a hall added in 1931. A scheme to rebuild the church was started in the late 1950s and the new church was opened and dedicated in 1963. It is now known as St Paul's Protestant Free Church.

Mrs. Sarah Matthews ran a mission for 50 years from 1886 at The Sluice, Normans Bay. Mrs. Matthews, whose husband was a Coastguard officer, began the mission in the old Coastguard station until a cottage was acquired for meetings. Later a mission hall was built.

Hamilton Hall, Eastwood Road.

A corrugated iron building in Eastwood Road was the first home of the Hamilton Hall (now the Bexhill Christian Assembly) when it was opened by the Christian Brethren in 1898. Known as the Gospel Hall, it was given by a London businessman, and used for 60 years, with a brick-built extension being added in 1949. The dilapidated hall was demolished in 1957 and a new building, linked to the extension, was opened that year, although the original baptistry remained in use.

In keeping with hundreds of Open Brethren meetings it claimed to be an assembly of Christians without a denomination tag. As Hamilton Evangelical Church in the 1970s it had a membership of over 100, but as attendances dropped it finally closed in the spring of 1992. With the support of Christian Brethren Assemblies in Eastbourne it was reopened in September the same year with 15 members of Hamilton Evangelical, and the oversight of Mr. Alan Elmes from Eastbourne. The church now operates, with the original doctrinal basis and constitution, as a totally self-supporting fellowship with the purpose of leading people to Jesus Christ.

THE SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army Hall in London Road.

Making a start in Bexhill was no easy matter for the Salvation Army. Its first mission station outside London was at Hastings. The movement spread to the villages, including Ninfield where, in July 1871, Catherine Booth came to lay the foundation stone of a meeting place. The building to which the founder's wife had given a start later became a Methodist church as the Army graduated by a natural process towards Bexhill. With characteristic courage, the unarmed civilians of Bramwell Booth's fight against poverty and sin had not flinched from their purpose despite many a rough house in Sussex.

Bexhill prided itself on its Victorian respectability. But the town could display violence and bigotry and the story of the Salvation Army's arrival in the town is one of the least palatable pages in its history. The new movement which took Christianity out to the people, preaching its word with the aid of military-style uniforms, tambourines and cornets was not readily understood or accepted. The 'Sally' Army's open-meeting *Hallelujahs* were returned with rotten fruit. When the Salvationists challenged, *Who will come and be saved?*, they found Bexhillians had a punch on the jaw ready for them. The Ninfield Salvationists' marches from their village to Bexhill for open-air meetings were a particular target for abuse. To get to Bexhill they had to run the gauntlet of Sidley's wrath. In spite of this, meetings were held on the Down and where Town Hall Square was later created.

A Bexhill Corps was started in 1892, meeting in a small hall which had been the sawmill of a builder's works behind Sharpe's stables in Station Road. One of the corps' prized possessions is its official history. The brown paper-covered book is a diary of events recording, in an elegant hand, that Corps 1413 was opened on 2nd May 1892 by Captain Masters and Lieutenant Godman. It records the purchase of freehold land measuring 40ft by 140ft in what was then known as Station Road, now London Road. It shows how the land cost £425 and a *senior hall* to seat 300 cost £845 to build. Legal fees of £54 put the total cost up to £1,324. Of this the Salvation Army's London headquarters contributed £660 and the corps was expected to raise £664. The stone-laying was performed on 23rd May 1914. The London Road Citadel was recently refurbished, bringing it up to modern standards to continue the movement's work.

By the 1920s the corps' band was at its zenith, attending functions outside the town and providing a regular feature in the town itself. A popular meeting spot was Buckhurst Place, where Sunday morning gatherings could in the street without fear of danger from the traffic or interference from townsfolk. The 'Sally' Army was by now accepted in the town as the friend of everyone. This was demonstrated in the Great Depression. One of the enduring images of this cruel era in the town is a photograph showing Salvation Army officers bringing comfort to the unemployed queuing in the cold outside the Ministry of Labour office in lower Belle Hill. Steam is coming from soup kitchen urns mounted over braziers fixed to an old pram.

One story illustrates both the progress the Salvationist movement made locally and its power to change lives for the good. As a young man, Bill Tatnall travelled from Bexhill to Hastings with the intention to help break up a Salvationist meeting. He came away converted and rose to become a Colonel in the movement and head of its Soldiers' and Sailors' League.

SERVANTS WITH JESUS

Prayer for revival in East Sussex and the celebration of the 1200th anniversary of Offa's Bexhill Charter were the roots of the Servants of Jesus, the Christian fellowship of women called from different church traditions to pray and work for the renewal and unity of God's people. The vision for the Servants with Jesus was for women to pray and work for their communities, and also to reclaim the Manor land in Old Town for the Church. In July 1971 Servants co-founder, Eileen Wheeler, read the Charter for the first time. She says *"As I read I realised the importance of King Offa's bequest for Christians in this part of East Sussex."*

On 12th May that year 120 women from East Sussex had met at the Manor Barn for a day of praise and prayer between Ascension Day and Pentecost. The theme of the day was Crowning Jesus Lord of our Lives. It was the first gathering to take place at the Manor Barn after the official opening the previous Sunday. The day ended with a Communion Service in St Peter's Church where several women were anointed and set aside for a variety of ministries. This was an ecumenical event, attended by women from widely different denominational backgrounds. Sister Eileen continues *"Reading the Charter two months later, I saw how highly significant the Manor site was for the whole Christian community in the area. I also saw the women's day of praise and prayer in a new perspective. We had unknowingly been led to meet in the place which had been the centre of Christian leadership, until the Reformation, for the undivided Church in this part of Sussex."*

So the vision for the Servants with Jesus was born! The vision was twofold; the creation of small inter-church groups of women to pray for and serve their local communities, and the recovery of the Manor site for the use of the Church in East Sussex.

The old Coach House seemed the only building left that could be restored for such a purpose. Negotiations began, first with Bexhill Council and then with Rother District Council, for the release of the Coach House to the Servants with Jesus. The aim was for the Servants to restore the building at their own expense and then use it as a resource for the whole

Church in Bexhill and surrounding area. In the following month the vision was shared with a number of women and local Church leaders. By Petertide, at the height of the Charter celebration, on 28th June 1972, the group was ready to register with the Charity Commission and for the trustees to sign the constitution. The aim was to Advance the Christian faith through the world by: promoting and praying for the fellowship of all Christian people; establishing centres for interdenominational worship and evangelism; training people of all ages in Christian discipleship and service; distributing and publishing Christian literature.

The first trustees were the Revd. John Bickersteth of Ashburnham, Michael Warren of Barcombe and Douglas Chamberlain of Mayfield, with Sister Eileen and Sister Eva Lowe, her co-founder. Church leaders Canon Michael Townroe, the Revd. Edmund Heddle and Ian McCulloch agreed to be pastoral advisers.

On 29th June, after an early morning Communion Service at St Peter's, Canon Townroe offered the constitution to God at the Communion Table and asked for his blessing on all who would be associated with the Servants with Jesus. By St Andrew's Day, 30th November 1972, twelve women had committed themselves to being Servants with Jesus. They were ready to emerge into public. A service of dedication was held in Penhurst Church and the members committed themselves to follow their calling and rule of life.

Meanwhile, negotiations had begun with local authorities for the purchase of the Coach House. It took six years of prayer and persuasion before Rother District Council agreed to release the dilapidated building. In August 1977 they offered to lease the building to the Servants for 20 years, on condition that the Servants restored it at their own expense. On 30th November 1978 Bishop Peter of Lewes blessed the Coach House and named it Jerusalem. Now the Coach House is available for the use of all Christian people for prayer and discussion groups, quiet days, Alpha away-days, seminars, anyone seeking pastoral help and residential visits for small groups or individuals. In 1995 the Servants bought the freehold of the Coach House. With the freehold came a derelict triangle of land. The late Sister Mary Stuart had a vision for this piece of land to be

transformed into a Prayer Garden. After much hard work this vision has been brought to fruition and the garden is now open to anyone who would like to find a place for prayer and quiet reflection. Bishop Wallace Benn of Lewes bless this garden in June 1999. During his address he said that the garden was *"a place to meet with the living God and to know the peace that only He can give."* The Bishop's words sum up the aspirations of the Servants with Jesus in all they seek to do.

There were two major contributions made by the Servants with Jesus in the 1980s, both to the Church in East Sussex and to the local community. In the early 1980s two groups of Bishop Peter's girls Schemers lived at the Coach House, sharing community life and discovering a life of prayer and study together, before going out to serve parishes in the county. Secondly, as there was no hospice in Bexhill, Hastings or Eastbourne in the early 1980s, the Servants with Jesus opened the Jerusalem Hospice in Buckhurst Road. The hospice was blessed by Bishop Peter in November 1981. It catered for five patients with volunteer staff and with Sister Eva in charge of the nursing. Over three years they cared for about 50 terminally sick patients. This was a very energetic and positive time for the Servants with Jesus.

The Servants are deeply committed to praying for their local churches and church leaders, and to serving their local communities. At present there are groups in Bexhill, Eastbourne, Hastings and Westfield, and individual sisters in Australia, Coggeshall, Littlehampton and the Isle of Wight.

ST. RICHARD OF BEXHILL

THE SUSSEX SAINT

There are many fig-trees in Old Town and the legend of how they came to be there is one of the most endearing in Bexhill's Christian history. St Richard of Chichester, one of the two Sussex saints, was a regular visitor to Bexhill in the 13th century. The Manor of Bexhill was held by the Bishops of Selsey from the time of Offa's grant. It was seized by William the Conqueror and only returned to the diocese of Chichester in 1148.

Richard of Wych was a beloved Bishop of Chichester who was known for his holy life and love for his people. He was born in 1197 and was a ploughboy, later going to Oxford and becoming a priest. He was made Bishop in 1244, but the king was not pleased with the appointment and threw Richard out of his see. For several years he wandered the Sussex Downs on foot, ministering to his people's spiritual and material needs. He used his own farming experience to help them produce crops and also encouraged them to grow figs. While he was exiled from the see Richard stayed at Tarring where he cultivated a fig tree which was said to survive for many centuries.

In time, the king relented and allowed Richard back. He was then able to enjoy his three homes in the diocese; the Palace at Chichester, Amberley Castle in mid-Sussex and the Manor House at Bexhill. He would have stayed many times at Bexhill and preached and celebrated Mass at St Peter's. Knowing his fondness for figs, it is conceivable that the trees in the area are the descendants of his.

Richard was canonised in 1262. He is pictured pruning a fig tree in Alan Sorrell's mural in the nave of St Peter's. One chronicler writing from the newly-built St Mary Magdalene's in 1913 believed St Richard of Chichester might well be called St Richard of Bexhill.

Hallelujah! and *Amen!* were interruptions so often made by an enthusiastic old man at the Belle Hill Wesleyan Chapel that chapel elders threatened to stop his soup ration if he spoke out again. He shut-up for a while by stuffing his handkerchief in his mouth, but was once more so overcome that he snatched out the hanky and roared : *Soup or no soup, Praise the Lord!*

A Reformation-era rector of St Peter's, Richard Borde, proclaimed to his parishioners at Pevensey that he *would rather be torn to pieces by wild horses than acknowledge King Harry as head in spiritual matters of the Church of England.*

Christchurch Methodist Church narrowly missed being built as a pub. A battle between a firm of brewers and the Temperance Movement over a plan to open a pub on the corner of Springfield Road and Holliers Hill was won when a London churchman bought the site for the building of a new church.

St Mark's Church, Little Common, was built in 1842 mainly from materials from the demolished No.42 Martello Tower at Bulverhythe. The building materials were brought by sea to Cooden and taken by cart to the site.

The youth club at St Stephen's Church was temporarily suspended in the late 1950s when members substituted the recording of church bells summoning the congregation to Evensong with Elvis Presley's *Jailhouse Rock.*

John Nutt, a 17th century rector of St Peter's, spent hardly any time in the parish, preferring to live at Berwick, which living he also held. St Peter's was taken away from him because : *he, living wholly non-resident to the Church, and in his absence, substituted to officiate for him scandalous and unworthy curates.*

An Anglican handed over a blank cheque in the 1890s and told a Baptist pastor to build his church (Beulah). The Pastor later staged a rates strike in protest against contributing indirectly to what he considered to be Anglican teaching in council schools!

No monk, Welshman, Irishman or Scotsman, or anyone born outside England, was allowed to be chaplain of the Chantry Chapel of St Peter's Church, according to the chapel's foundation document of the mid-15th century.

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Association

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